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ABSTRACT

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Teacher Identity Construction in Different Contexts of Teacher Education in Brazil[1]

Júlio Emílio Diniz-Pereira[2]

Abstract

Considering current public policies for teacher education, recent educational reforms, and the renewed discussion of the teacher's role within contemporaneous approaches in the field of education, it is essential to discuss how teacher identity is gradually constructed in teacher education programs. In this paper, I discuss processes of teacher identity construction through an analysis of two different teacher education programs that have emerged in Brazil in the last two decades. The first one is the official teacher education reform program which has been considered a "top-down" conservative reform program; the second one is the teacher education program proposed by the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) which has been considered a "bottom-up" progressive program. This analysis is an attempt to gain a better understanding of the multidimensional processes that influence people as they become educators through their entry in preservice programs under particular educational reform environments.

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1. Introduction

Beginning in the 1980s, we have observed a sharp increase in qualitative research in teacher education around the world. Furthermore, there has been a change in focus in that line of research, one that places educators in the center of much of the research investigation. An increased interest in the matters of *subjectivity* and *identity* in teacher education has been observed ever since.

In order to better understand the current importance of this theme, we need to place it in a larger context. Rapid changes in the world – the rise of the information society, scientific and technological developments and the expanding global economy – have made intercultural and interethnic contacts a fairly ordinary phenomenon. However, paradoxically, this increasingly common cultural diversity is juxtaposed with the powerful homogenizing instruments of a globalized planet, which supports the awareness that cultural issues cannot be considered apart from power relations. That is why discussions in the fields of sociology and anthropology today strive to understand how cultural and ethnic identities are being formed in such a changing society and, more specifically, how they are being constructed among socially disadvantaged or culturally dominated groups. Consequently, the topic of cultural and ethnic identities has gained importance in the past few decades.

Deep changes in the business world also motivate questions about the repercussions on construction of a worker's subjectivity. As a result, likewise, there is a rising interest in studies on professional identities in the field of work. Teacher identity can be considered an emerging topic in educational research as well. However, there is

little research that explores how teachers define and interpret various aspects of their professional identity.

In this paper, I discuss processes of teacher identity construction through an analysis of two different teacher education programs that have emerged in Brazil in the last two decades. The first one is the official teacher education reform program which has been considered a "top-down" conservative reform; the second one is the teacher education program proposed by the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) which has been considered a "bottom-up" progressive program.

2. Teacher Identity Construction through the Official Teacher Education Reform in Brazil

The current teacher education reform in Brazil must be discussed in regard to the larger Brazilian state reform. Since the end of military regime in the 1980s, neoliberal policies have tried to minimize the interference of the state in Brazilian society and economy. The 'free market ideology' has been spreading into different sectors of Brazilian society, including education. Consequently, privatization of different educational levels – mainly at the higher education level – has been one of the principal goals of this current reform program. While in the 1970s, two thirds of higher education institutions were public and one third private, almost 85% of these institutions are owned businessmen today. It is clear and undeniable that the Brazilian government has chosen the private sector to be responsible one for expansion in higher education.

Furthermore, current Brazilian teacher education reform must not be separated from the larger centralized and authoritarian educational reform either. The

implementation of a national curriculum combined with the imposition of standardized tests – actually a strategy to guarantee the adoption of this curriculum approach adoption in different school and college levels – is only one example of this arbitrary reform.

The main changes in teacher education in Brazil have been led by two important documents: First, the "Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional" (LDB) – the major educational law in Brazil; and the "Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais para a Formação de Professores da Educação Básica em Nível Superior, Curso de Graduação Plena" – a document which details and puts into practice the specific orientations on teacher education present in the LDB. The second document, after a false democratic process of discussion – public audiences were organized for legitimizing a pre-elaborated official document rather than to allow to voice the real demands of civil society –, aims at introducing 'alternative' ways of dealing with the problem of shortage of qualified and certified schoolteachers. Only 30% of Brazilian schoolteachers have college level teacher licensure. Thus, the main goal of this reform is to create 'shortcuts' in order to certify as many teachers as possible while spending the least amount of money possible. Education at distance, inservice teacher certification, and a proliferation of private teachers' preparation institutions are some of the 'solutions' found to solve such a shortage.

However, it is essential to stress that the principal aspects of this teacher education reform in Brazil are not original ones. They stem from orientations found in World Bank higher educational reports for developing countries. For instance, one can find many similarities between official Brazilian educational documents and the following World Bank reports: "*Higher Education: The Lessons of Experience*" and "*Higher Education in Developing Countries – Peril and Promise*". In these reports, there

is a clear orientation toward a diversification of higher education institutions, including the teachers' preparation institutions. Furthermore, specific issues in the Brazilian teacher education reform, such as breaking out of the 'monopoly' of public universities hold over teacher education, are also adapted from the World Bank orientations as can be found in the World Bank document: *Accommodating the Growing Demand for Higher Education in Brazil: A Role for the Federal Universities?*

The three most important points of the official and conservative teacher education reform program in Brazil are:

- The conception of 'competence' is crucial for guiding preservice teacher education courses;
- The coherence between the teachers' preparation and the practice which is expected for prospective teachers;
- Research is an essential element in the teachers' professional preparation.

First, the idea of 'competence' highlighted in the "Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais para a Formação de Professores da Educação Básica em Nível Superior, Curso de Graduação Plena" is related to the notion of 'what the teachers need to do'. This pragmatical conception of competence focuses on the teachers' practical and technical skills. According to this point of view, it seems the current conservative Brazilian government believes that teachers need basically to learn how to apply the national curriculum in their classrooms and prepare their students for getting high scores in standardized tests. If it is true, the notion of coherence follows logically. Thus, the

teachers' preparation should be directed strictly toward 'what they need to do'. The conception of 'coherence', which is sustained throughout this document, is connected to the need for technical preparation of specific practical skills.

While the third point, an emphasis on research as preparation, may appear paradoxical statement in this document, actually, the document promotes an instrumental conception of research. Again, the influence of the World Bank can also be realized here. The World Bank has recently co-opted the discourse of *teacher research* in order to keep their control over teacher education programs. The view of teaching as a form of educational inquiry, without discussing issues such as, teachers' working conditions and professional qualifications, has merely resulted in an intensification of teachers' work.

Hence, through this official teacher education reform, the Brazilian government intends to construct a kind of teacher identity in which teachers are conceived as technicians, experts who rigorously put into practices the national curriculum and efficiently prepare their students for standardized tests. In doing so, this teachers' professional teacher preparation approach also reinforces a conception of teaching as an individualistic rather than a collective and collaborative enterprise.

It is interesting to realize a contradiction in this process of implementation of the official teacher education reform. Trying to deal with the shortage of certified and qualified teachers without overcoming the actual reasons for this problem, the Brazilian government also allows initiatives to come from civil society and social movements. In the next section, I will briefly discuss a different kind of teacher identity construction that is possible in the teacher education program of the Landless Workers' Movement.

3. Teacher Identity Construction through the Teacher Education Program of the Landless Workers' Movement[3]

The Landless Workers' Movement (MST) is the largest social movement in Latin America and one of the most successful grassroots movements in the world. According to official data, less than 3% of the population owns two-thirds of Brazil's arable land. The MST is a response to this inequality.

One of the lessons that the MST can take from its own history up until now is that it is not enough to struggle only for land. The struggle for agrarian reform is much broader, and entails the attainment of all the social rights that comprise what one can call full citizenship. Education is one of these rights, but one that also requires mobilization, organization and struggle in Brazil.

Today, there is a constellation of MST 1,000 schools from first to fourth grade and 50 schools from fifth to eight grade, with 95,000 children and adolescents attending schools in encampments and settlements. Despite this large number of schools, the number of children and adolescents not in school continues to grow, either because their schools are not legally recognized or because the MST proposed curriculum, adapted to the necessities of the children of rural workers, is not respected by the official state education.

Close to 2,800 teachers are working directly with these schools. Of these, nearly 850 are teachers of reading and writing for youths and adults. Currently, there are close to

[3] Part of the information about the Landless Workers' Movement in this section is also available through the website http://www.mstbrazil.org.

17,000 students learning to read. Some teachers work as volunteers; others are mobilized for projects in partnership.

For the MST, education includes the participation of everyone from children, women, youth and the elderly, constructing new relations and a new consciousness, and includes participation in marches, assemblies, courses, walks, volunteer work, acts of solidarity, occupations, mobilizations, coming together to learn and teach reading and writing, and more than this, to read and write the reality of their lives.

This conception of education is also presented in the main points of the MST teacher education program[4]:

- Technical and professional preparation: It promotes scientific and practical knowledge, skills, behavior, care, and ethical attitudes regarding thinking and doing education in general terms and more specifically for rural areas as well as for agrarian reform and social justice goals;
- Political preparation: It entails a historical and class consciousness development to help educators understand that their practices are linked to a larger social transformation purpose;
- Cultural preparation: It emphasizes being able to organize in creative ways and constructing a culture of cooperation and solidarity.

From these three dimensions of the MST teacher education program, it is possible to realize its political and ideological intention toward a structural transformation of

[4] CALDARTI, R. S. (1997). *Educação em Movimento. Formação de educadoras e educadores no MST.* Petrópolis, RJ: Vozes.

Brazilian society. Actually, it is hard to separate the major goals of the Movement in terms of promoting agrarian reform and social justice from its educational objectives. They are completely interwoven. Even the technical and professional dimension of this program has a clear connection to its broader political purpose. In an attempt to overcome the isolation and apolitical character of schoolteachers, the MST tries to promote also *collaborative teacher research* in its schools. Grounded in Freirean ideas, research is conceived here as a mutual process for students and teachers to question existing knowledge, power, and conditions. Thus, community research by teachers, with students as co-investigators, establishes a student-centered, democratic process through which curriculum is built from the bottom up rather than from the top down.

Therefore, the MST intends to construct a progressive, critical, and radical teacher identity among its educators. It means the teachers' identity here is not neutral. It is rather a professional identity that is explicitly committed to social justice. Rather than reinforcing individualism in teaching, this professional identity is constructed through experiences of solidarity and collective work.

4. Final Comments

The main purpose of this paper has not been to compare the official Brazilian teacher education reform program to the teacher education program of the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) in terms of the construction of teacher identity. It could appear as a naïve attempt to compare apples to oranges. It is obvious that these teacher education reforms/programs have different premises and goals. However, it is crucial to emphasize that both are not ideologically free enterprises. Their ideological views of

education are quite different. And this is the reason the construction of teacher identities in the two programs is different.

As we already know, the concept of identity – and teacher identity as well – is complex. There is no guarantee that teachers working in either of the programs will construct professional identities embodying the ideological elements present in these programs. People – their social identities, their culture, their life history, and their interaction with 'others' – have an active role in the construction of such professional identities. However, we need more research on and discussion about the impact of teacher education programs on the construction of teacher identity. In fact, there is no consensus in the current literature on the impact of teacher education programs in the construction of teacher identity. Therefore, we need to spend more time researching and discussing the kinds of teacher identities that have been constructed through different ideological teacher education programs and why. In particular, we need to investigate how prospective teachers respond to these different ideological premises as they shape their professional identities. These are complex issues, which need to be carefully analyzed in the teacher education field.

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